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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SARAJEVO 000807

SIPDIS

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR (DICARLO), EUR/SCE (HOH/FOOKS) ND S/WCI
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SUBJECT: BOSNIA - BRATUNAC THE NEXT SREBRENICA?

REF: SARAJEVO 706 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Classified by DCM Judith B.Cefkin for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On May 12, 2007, the Bosniak Association "Women of Podrinje" intends to bury 108 identified victims of the May 1992 Bratunac massacre in land owned by the Islamic Community. However, Bratunac Mayor Nedeljko Mladjenovic (SDS) and Serb delegates in the Bratunac Municipal Council refuse to include the targeted burial area in the municipal regulatory urban plan and will not grant a permit for the burial. As tensions in the wake of the ICJ verdict flare in neighboring Srebrenica, Bratunac seems staged to be the next crisis in the eastern Republika Srpska if there is no imminent resolution to the burial controversy. We have been working behind the scenes, as has the Office of the High Representative, to persuade RS officials to overturn the Bratunac Municipality decision. END SUMMARY

SERBS BLOCK BOSNIAK BURIALS IN BRATUNAC

2. (U) In May 1992, Serb forces massacred 603 Bosniaks in the eastern Republika Srpska (RS) municipality of Bratunac. On May 12, the 15th anniversary of the massacre, Bosniaks plan to bury 108 identified victims on downtown property owned by the Bratunac Islamic Community. This property, which is approximately 150 meters from the city center, was seized by Serbs during the 1992-1995 war. Serb forces also destroyed the mosque that had been located there. In 2003, the Bratunac Municipal Council returned a portion of the property (1.2 of 2.6 hectares) to the Islamic Community. The remaining portion now contains a Serb military cemetery and seven houses for police officers. Bosniaks are not seeking return of or compensation for the land on which the military cemetery and houses exist, but for more than a year have been seeking a permit to bury their dead near the newly reconstructed mosque.

3. (U) Bratunac Mayor Mladjenovic, a member of the Serb Democratic Party (SDS), and Serb delegates in the Bratunac Municipal Council refuse to grant a permit for the burial, however. They claim a cemetery has never existed at that spot, nor is one provided for by the urban-regulatory plan. (Note: Both the military cemetery and the houses have been incorporated into the municipality's urban plan. End Note.) Bosniaks counter that the intended site belongs to the Islamic Community and that they have every right to bury their dead in that location. The Bratunac Islamic Community

also stress that there is already a small pre-war graveyard on the site. (Comment: Some of the victims families prefer the downtown site because the presence of 120 gravestones would serve as a memorial and permanent reminder of what happened in Bratunac 15 years ago. End Comment.)

BOSNIAKS DETERMINED TO PRESS AHEAD WITH THEIR PLANS

14. (U) In response to their request for burial in the town center, the Municipal Council offered the Islamic Community and family associations two alternate sites for the burial. One site, located on a hillside in the village of Suha just outside the city center, is unacceptable to the families because it is the site of a mass grave exhumed in 2005. The other location, in the more distant village of Bernice, has a pre-existing cemetery in which both Serbs and Bosniaks are already buried. However, Kadefa Rizvanovic, the President of the unregistered Bosniak "Women of Podrinje," association says victims, families are determined to organize the burial on the chosen site, regardless of the Municipal Council's suggestions. Serb authorities and NGOs counter that Serb victims are not buried in downtown locations, but instead in an extension of the pre-war Orthodox Church graveyard and that Bosniaks should also bury their dead in existing cemeteris. The Islamic Community appealed the permit reusals to the RS Ministry of Urban Planning, which s led by Fatima Fatibegovic, a non-partisan, thouth Party for BiH-affiliated, Bosniak. On April 1, Bratunac's Imam and family members traveled to Banja Luka to discuss the appeal with RS Urban Planning Assistant Minister Maida Ibrisagic. After the meeting, Office of the High Representative (OHR) officials said that the Ibrisagic stated that the Ministry

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views this as a very clear case of the Islamic Community having been deprived of its rights. She also told those in the meeting that the Ministry will resolve the appeal as soon as possible. The RS government will discuss the appeal at its session on April 13.

15. (U) The Federation government and a private company from Visoko have already secured funding for preparatory works on the graveyard and for the burial. The remains of the identified victims have been stored in Visoko and Tuzla mortuaries since 2004 and family associations demand they finally have the right to be laid to rest. (Note: The remains now consist only of bone fragments and personal effects found on the victims during exhumation. For this reason, arguments that the burial cannot take place in the city center because of the potential environmental impact of decomposition are moot. End Note.) Burial organizers plan to lay the first tombstone and begin preparations for the burial as early as April 15. The Municipal Organization of Families of Captured and Killed Soldiers and Missing Civilians, a radical Serb NGO, and other Serbs from Bratunac have indicated that they will protest the April 15 events. They also threatened to protest and disrupt the May 12 burials, including physically preventing them.

SERBS CAMPAIGN AGAINST BOSNIAK LEADER

16. (C) On March 14, with tensions in Bratunac already heightened by the secession debate in neighboring Srebrenica, the long-standing burial controversy and other Serb nationalist provocations, Bratunac Municipal Council dismissed Bosniak Speaker Refik Begic in part for lending his support to the May 12 burial plans. Begic is a member of the Party for Democratic Action (SDA). We understand that the Serb Radical Party (SRS) was behind the move, but it enjoyed support from other Serb parties as well, including the Serb Democratic Party (SDS). Councilors from moderate Serb parties, RS PM Milorad Dodik's Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) and Mladen Ivanic's Party for Democratic Progress (PDP), either abstained or supported Begic's

removal. (Note: Serbs in Bratunac are far more radical than those in neighboring Srebrenica and often obstruct reconciliation and cooperation between Serbs and Bosniaks. The Council has 8 SDS and 3 SRS representatives among its 31 councilors, but the determination and activities of Serb nationalists on the Council, and in the municipality as a whole, often pushes more moderate Serbs to support radical positions. End Note.)

17. (C) Begic, a close Embassy contact for many years, was among the municipality's first returnees. His decision to return to the municipality after the war with his family inspired more than 5,000 Bosniaks to do the same. As a landmine survivor (Begic now walks with a prosthetic leg) and a former prisoner of war, his courage and personal story provides him with great influence among Bratunac Bosniaks. (Note: He was held prisoner by Serbs in the school where his children now attend classes. End Note.) He has used that influence to persuade Bosniak returnees to refrain from responding rashly to nationalist Serb provocations, which are frequent. As Municipal Speaker, Begic also maintained a cooperative relationship with Mayor Mladjenovic and effected positive changes in the municipality. His removal was a bitter blow to Bosniaks in Bratunac as well as other returnee communities in the eastern RS, many of whom interpret it as a sign the moderation is a dead end.

COMMENT

18. (C) Local inter-ethnic controversies are not new, though the situation in Bratunac has always been among the most troublesome in the country. In the past, state-level party leaders and politicians have generally tried to prevent local tensions from producing a national political crisis. Today, Bosniak member of the Tri-Presidency Haris Silajdzic sees local inter-ethnic conflict as a means of advancing his divisive anti-Dayton agenda. In addition, moderate Serb political leaders often ignore Serb nationalist provocations and are reluctant to take necessary steps to diffuse political crises the Serb nationalists provoke -- as they have in Bratunac, for example. In the post-International

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Court of Justice political environment, this is a combustible mix, and it may produce an ugly and damaging flare-up in Bratunac on May 15, if not this weekend. We have been working behind the scenes to diffuse the crisis both in reversing the action against former Speaker Begic and to secure the burial permit. We will continue to keep the pressure on moderate Serbs to confront nationalists within their own community -- especially those who are threatening to provoke yet another crisis in the eastern RS.
MCELHANEY